

Hermes in the half-light: Priam, Achilles, and the end of the *Iliad*

Tim Whitmarsh

Have you ever wondered why the *Iliad* ends where it does? Tim Whitmarsh explains the power of the epic's absence of closure.

What kind of end to the *Iliad* should we expect? A grand climax? Perhaps the death of Achilles as the culmination of the cycles of avenging violence that did for Sarpedon, Patroclus, and Hector? Homer certainly gives us a powerful sense of Achilles' ultimate destiny: when Iris visits his mother Thetis in book 24 she finds her mourning him already, burdened with a goddess's grim foreknowledge. The fall of Troy too would have made for a powerful closing set piece, and this (again) is predicted throughout the poem: in book 6, for example, Hector tells Andromache: 'I know the day will come'.

But when the *Iliad* does end, the death of Achilles and the fall of Troy are in the future. What actually transpires in book 24, the poem's last book, is something less dramatic, and subtler. Priam visits Achilles secretly, and begs for the return of his son Hector's corpse. Achilles, surprisingly, agrees, and promises a temporary truce. Finally Priam re-enters Troy with the body, prompting a series of laments over Hector by three women (Hector's wife Andromache, his mother Hecuba, and Helen). The poem ends with the line 'thus it was they set about burying horse-taming Hector'.

The ultimate anti-climax?

Many have found this ending anti-climactic, and indeed some did already in antiquity. A number of manuscripts transmitting the poem change the ending to make its lack of closure more explicit and signal that the story was to be continued:

'thus it was they set about burying Hector; but the Amazon came / the daughter of great-hearted, man-slaying Ares'.

By providing a transition to the next phase of the epic cycle (which will conclude in the capture of Troy), this couplet looks

forward to the 'real' ending that readers and audiences have all been looking forward to.

There is, however, another way of looking at things. The *Iliad* is the story not of the Trojan War as a whole, but of Achilles' anger (announced as the poem's theme in the very first line). Although it is certainly set against the tumultuous backdrop of this most decisive of mythological conflicts, it is really about an episode in the psychological life of one of the characters. For this reason, most readings of the poem's climax have focused on the apparent transformation in Achilles' behaviour. Priam begs Achilles for his son's body, throwing himself on his mercy in a formalized procedure that scholars call 'supplication'. So far in the poem, supplication has tended to be rejected out of hand: there is little space for clemency in the *Iliad*'s violent world. But here Achilles, in a strikingly uncharacteristic moment, pities Priam. Priam, for his part, has kissed the hands that killed his son. Still more powerful is the emotional empathy generated between the two men: Priam begs Achilles to recall his own father; Achilles obliges and weeps, detecting something of his own father Peleus in the distraught old man in front of him. The virtual father-son relationship, the emotional bond between the two, has displaced enemy-hostility. The iron-willed brute who once seemed consumed by undying rage now seems to have transformed into something infinitely more humane.

How do we explain this change? Many modern readers, influenced by the dominant political and religious codes of the liberal West, have seen this as the moment where a Christ-like compassion triumphs over divisive anger. 'Justice and love', wrote the French philosopher Simone Weil of this passage, 'drench all with their light'. But there is, in fact, no mention of

justice or love in the poem. Achilles may weep with Priam and offer him his hospitality, but he has assented to the transfer of Hector's body because of divine command. He retains that terrifying menace: 'don't provoke me!' he warns Priam at one point; Priam, we are told, 'obeyed in terror', at which point Achilles leapt up 'like a lion' (a notably warlike simile). And the temporary halt of hostilities is overshadowed by the promise that they will resume after Hector's funeral. Priam's last words to Achilles (his last words in the poem) are 'on the twelfth day we shall make war, if we must'. *Iliad* 24 is not a Christian text: it is but a pause in the grim slaughter that, both Priam and Achilles know, will lead to their own deaths.

Out of the darkness?

Simone Weil is wrong too about the 'light'. *Iliad* 24 is suffused with darkness, a heavy murk that is literal as well as figurative. This final book is full of shapes glimpsed in the twilight, of visions and premonitions, of semi-wakefulness. It opens with a sleepless Achilles tossing and turning, before heading to the shore to trace loops in the sand before dawn. That scene prepares the way for the later encounter with Priam, which takes place in an eerie gloom:

*As soon as the two [Priam and his driver] drove past the great tomb of Ilus
They drew rein at the ford to water mules and the team.
A sudden darkness had swept across the earth
And Hermes was all but on them
...*

The entirety of the visit takes place in the night that follows this freakish dusk, which is unexplained but seems to be the work of the gods. For this darkness marks the appearance of Hermes who plays a central role in *Iliad* 24. Hermes it is, too, who at the end of the Priam-Achilles scene, wakes the old king and encourages

him to leave before dawn. Both appearances of the spooky god are spine-tingling moments. When he first appears, albeit disguised, it is literally a hair-raising moment: 'the old man was stunned, in a swirl of terror; the hairs stood bristling over his gnarled body'. Likewise second time around, 'the old king woke in terror'. The Achilles-Priam encounter is thus neatly framed by these two weird meetings with Hermes, one at sundown and the other before dawn. The fording of the river plays a similar role at the spatial level: as so often in Greek narrative, a crossed waterway marks the passage into a new phase of the story.

Hermes' magic

Who is Hermes? Hermes is best known for doing what he does here – conveying divine commands to mortals. In this role, he is capable of extraordinarily rapid movement, symbolized by his winged sandals that (book 24 tells us) 'wing him over the waves / and boundless earth with the speed of gusting winds'. But there is more. Not only can he move between spaces, he also moves humans from one position to another, either literally or metaphorically: 'escorting men is your greatest joy', says Zeus. Many Greek houses had busts of Hermes at the front door, the point of passage between public and private. And at the end of the *Odyssey*, Hermes functions as 'psychopomp', conveyor of the dead down to Hades. Many readers have seen echoes of this 'psychopomp' role in *Iliad* 24 too, where his nocturnal meeting with Priam is haunted by intimations of death, and where the river suggests the Styx, the boundary of the Underworld. In his role as president of in-between states and as ring-master of the uncanny, Hermes is the perfect figurehead for the poem's end.

But is he Hermes psychopomp? When Hermes prepares to accompany Priam, he is said to have 'seized the wand that enchants the eyes of men / whenever he wants, or wakes them up from sleep'. The reference is of course to the staff entwined by serpents or *caduceus* that identifies the god in the visual arts. But why does he need it here? In part, because the couplet reinforces a theme we have already met; for the phrase about enchanting eyes and awakening sleepers is also found at the beginning of *Odyssey* 24, where Hermes uses the same implement to guide the dead suitors down to the Underworld. Only in these two passages in the whole of Homer is it called a 'wand' (*rhabdos*). This, together with the fact that the wand seems to have a more obvious function in *Odyssey* 24, suggests that the poet of *Iliad* 24 wants us to think of this function.

Although the *Iliad* poet is not explicit about Hermes' use of the wand, its

enchancing and waking functions are very much in play. Not only does Hermes wake Priam from sleep, he 'enchants the eyes of men' by doing as Zeus tells him and preventing the Achaeans from recognising Priam. Indeed he exceeds this brief, disguising himself 'in the likeness of a young prince, sporting his first beard' (he adopts a similar disguise in *Odyssey* 10, where he meets Odysseus to give him the magical herb called *moly*). This disguise is superfluous in narrative terms: once they arrive at Achilles' hut he unmasks himself as Hermes, and in the second encounter dispenses with disguise altogether. It underlines the point that the world of *Iliad* 24 is an uncanny one of metamorphosis and illusion.

Hermes' 'enchantment of the eyes of men' plays an important role. The disguised Hermes addresses Priam initially as 'father', a typical, respectful greeting for an older man – except that he concludes this opening speech with the striking phrase 'I liken you to my own father'. Priam, moreover, responds by addressing him as 'dear child'. At this point, the identity confusion becomes perplexing. In what sense are Hermes and Priam like son and father? A clue is provided a little later, where the disguised Hermes claims to be a servant of Achilles'. The point, I think, is that the disguised Hermes, playing his son-like role in relation to Priam, is clearing the way for Achilles' parallel adoption of that role, in the empathetic scene discussed above. In other words, it is Hermes, god of transitions and changed statuses, whose intervention allows Achilles to see his own father in Priam, and vice versa. Perhaps, then, we should be seeing the empathetic Achilles as transformed not permanently – as the liberal Christian reading requires – but only for the duration of that long, strange, dream-like night. The lion-like Achilles will be back, gorging himself on Trojan blood, before long.

The power of poetry

One final point on that wand, or *rhabdos* in Greek. The *rhabdos* was also one of the most visible identifiers of performers of song; indeed, many ancients concluded that that was why such performers were known as 'rhapsodes'. What does a singer do if not enchant, transport audiences into other places? Hermes, the god who can make one thing seem like another, embodies the most magical of Homeric techniques, the simile. When a poet waves his wand, like Hermes he alchemically transforms his subject matter, making likenesses out of things that are different, allowing us to see the world in a different way. Hermes was, tradition tells us, the inventor of the lyre, and so pre-programmed to serve as a figure for the powers of poetry itself. The end of the

Iliad announces not the birth of a new ethical system based on pity and compassion, but the power of language, especially poetic language, to reveal the world to us in new ways.

Tim Whitmarsh teaches at Corpus Christi (again!). When he is not wandering its halls in the half-light, he can be found writing: his next book, Battling the gods: the struggle against religion in ancient Greece and Rome, will be published by Faber and Faber.